

## Maitri Setu over Feni river

Bangladesh should equally benefit from the project

AS the bridge over Feni river (namely "Maitri Setu") has been inaugurated by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her Indian counterpart Narendra Modi on March 9, we are very hopeful that it will create new trade opportunities for the two countries and increase inter-regional trade. Reportedly, this 1.9-kilometre bridge has connected Ramgarh of Bangladesh to Sabroom, a town in the Indian state of Tripura, and is supposed to improve connectivity of south Assam, Mizoram, Manipur and Tripura with Bangladesh and Southeast Asia. Apart from increased trade and business relations with India, we expect that Bangladesh would also be able to use this improved road connectivity to increase its trade relations with Nepal and Bhutan.

Since Bangladesh government has shown continuous commitment to India in strengthening its road connectivity in the region, we also expect India to show the same level of commitment so that Bangladesh can equally benefit from the projects. Bangladesh's cooperation in completing the Feni bridge project has clearly shown our willingness to be a part of the connectivity projects. Therefore, India should look into how Bangladesh can also benefit from it and provide us with new market opportunities for our products. Moreover, since Bangladesh's geographic location is extremely advantageous, we should take this as an opportunity and maximise our locational advantage as a connectivity hub between South and Southeast Asia, which has also been expressed by the PM. We hope that with improved road connectivity, there will be more foreign investment coming in, which is very important to maintain Bangladesh's economic growth.

Overall, we think the completion of the Feni bridge, as part of a greater road connectivity project, is a very good development in the Bangladesh-India relations. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has rightly said that "political boundaries shouldn't become physical trade barriers" as she expected the Maitri Setu to significantly improve the socioeconomic condition of the people of Bangladesh and India. We only hope that Bangladesh can play an important role in regional trade and commerce with the cross-border transport systems that it is developing with India.

## Should we worry about the new Covid-19 variant?

Prevention is everyone's responsibility

THERE has been a new and concerning development with regard to the Covid-19 pandemic situation in Bangladesh. Health officials at the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR) revealed on Tuesday that at least 5 cases of the UK coronavirus variant (N501Y.V1) were found in the country in January, with the first case occurring on January 5. The Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) is now conducting contact tracing to get more details on the spread of this variant. Meanwhile, there has been a spike in the Covid-19 infection rate recently, with the rate being 5.13 percent on Tuesday—from 4.98 percent on Monday and 4.3 percent on Sunday, according to DGHS data. Adding to our alarm is the fact that there has been also a drop in the number of people being vaccinated.

This disconcerting series of developments comes at a time when the nation is preparing to reopen all schools and colleges on March 30, and the universities at a later stage soon afterwards. The UK variant has been found to spread more rapidly than other variants of the virus and may even be more infectious to children, according to scientists at the UK's New and Emerging Respiratory Virus Threats Advisory Group (NERVTAG). While it cannot be concluded for certain that it is this variant that is causing the recent surge in infections in Bangladesh, IEDCR representatives believe that the government should conduct genome sequencing—although the process is expensive—to trace mutations in the virus at regular intervals.

We fully agree with the health minister's advice for people to maintain social distancing and wear masks, no matter what the variant is. But we also believe that it is the responsibility of all organisations, public and private, to ensure that those they are responsible for (employees, students, etc.) are following these guidelines rigorously. As the high summer months of April through June approach, we must all be more vigilant as the past year set a precedent of the infection rate being higher during that season.

Now that we are aware of this new variant's spread, the seven-day quarantine mandated for UK air travellers by the health ministry in December last year should also be imposed even more strictly. Vaccinations are taking place across the country now, but they should not be our main form of prevention. We believe that just as the government should do more to promote the Covid-19 vaccines (especially in rural areas) and to implement other preventative measures more strictly, it is also the responsibility of all organisations and individuals to practice these precautions on their own and to raise awareness about them wherever possible.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

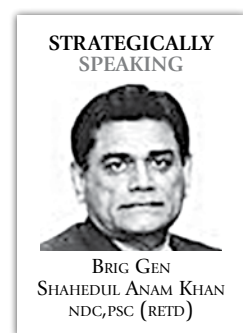
letters@thedailystar.net

### Dhaka's noise pollution

Dhaka is a city plagued with noise pollution. As the capital of one of the most densely populated countries, it suffers from incessant noise from car horns, loud speakers, construction work, etc. According to a WHO study, we have noise levels of excessive decibels coming out of traffic congestions, factories and various other sources. While most of the sources of noise pollution may be unavoidable, I think noise from loud speakers and needless use of car horns can be brought under control. I urge the authorities to address these easily avoidable problems on a priority basis.

Md. Shahriar Iqbal Antor, Dhaka

# India's message on border killings is loud and clear: Like it or lump it!



BRIG GEN SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN NDC, PSC (RETD)

THERE were two senior-level meetings between Bangladesh and India so far in 2021. One was held at the foreign secretary level in New Delhi in January, while the other was held between the two foreign ministers in Dhaka a week ago—both as preliminary exercises in preparation for Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Dhaka later this month as part of celebrations marking the 50th anniversary of our independence.

While the first meeting in January was part of regular consultations, and has nothing much to write home about, S Jaishankar's visit and subsequent comments on the border killings bear enormous significance for Bangladesh. That and the West Bengal chief minister's comments on the prospects of a water-sharing deal about the Teesta river are two significant messages that have been conveyed to Bangladesh recently.

Firstly, accept border killings ("unfortunate deaths" is the euphemism India prefers to describe Bangladeshi deaths by BSF bullets), until such time as the "criminality" of the border is cured. And secondly, leave the Teesta water for the future.

Am I getting too ahead of myself? That depends on who is reading this piece.

Criminal activities are responsible for the killings along the India-Bangladesh border, so said Mr. Jaishankar during a joint press conference after his latest visit

to Dhaka. There is a clear message in his statement, and one wonders whether our foreign office has got it. But we have, and loud and clear too. Let me quote the Indian foreign minister's comments in order for the readers to read between the lines and grasp the significance of it.

He said, "Every death is regrettable but we also have to ask ourselves why is there a problem, and the problem is because of crime. So our shared objective should be a no-crime-no-death border and I am sure if we can get it right, we can address

December 2020 were all criminals? That number was the highest in the last several years. This despite the level of amity and friendship created in the last decade between the two neighbours. Of those killed, five were reportedly tortured. Thirdly, the victims ("criminals", according to India) being Bangladeshi, the ball is in Bangladesh's court. The onus has been put squarely on Bangladesh for the deaths on the borders. The burden of the solution of the "problem"—since those who were

will be met with instant punishment and the "criminal" with the inevitable death, without the opportunity for self-defence.

Just imagine: if the US border guards apply the criteria which India seems to have fixed newly in relation to the use of lethal weapons along the Indo-Bangladesh border, there will be thousands of dead bodies littered along the US-Mexico borders every day.

As far as water sharing of the Teesta is concerned, the prognosis is bleak despite the Indian prime minister's reiteration



PHOTO: AFP

*What we have seen in Mr Jaishankar's statement is the deft display of diplomacy that has helped India to absolve itself of all responsibilities for the killing of Bangladeshis in the border areas with one sentence: stop border crimes, the killings will stop.*

this problem effectively." He also added that several of the reported deaths (of Bangladeshi nationals) "are fairly deep inside India".

Before we go further, let me ask if every criminal in India is served with a bullet in his or her body. Is that how India deals with criminals in the country? What else can be the inference of the statement of the Indian foreign minister regarding the high incidence of killings by BSF personnel of Bangladeshi citizens? And if some "criminals" were found dead well inside Indian territory, was shooting them the only option?

The Indian FM's comments carry several implications, and it's surprising that his statement was not adequately responded to by his Bangladeshi counterpart. In fact, we heard no riposte, not even a whimper from him. Should we assume that Bangladesh concurs with the Indian view that, firstly, the "problem" stems solely from the "criminalisation" of the border, and secondly, that the 45 Bangladeshis killed by BSF between January and

killed are Bangladeshi and fall into the category of "criminals"—has been thrust on us as well.

What we have seen in Mr Jaishankar's statement is the deft display of diplomacy that has helped India to absolve itself of all responsibilities for the killing of Bangladeshis in the border areas with one sentence: stop border crimes, the killings will stop.

We believe we are owed an explanation as to what constitutes criminal acts. If smuggling falls into that category, are we to believe that only Bangladeshis are involved in smuggling? How come the Indian cattle can negotiate the fence and cross into Bangladesh? Who determines whether someone is a criminal? Who decides if the so-called criminals deserve the bullet? The role of judge-jury-and-executioner that the BSF has been playing so far has now been given the official seal of approval by the Indian government. Every killing will have a predated approval. Every "crime", according to the new Indian philosophy,

of India's commitment and continued effort to complete the interim water sharing arrangement for the Teesta River. The Modi government has to contend with the Mamata factor, and Ms. Banerjee shows no signs of relenting. In her address at a public meeting in Siliguri recently, she said that the people of West Bengal should have enough water of the Teesta for themselves first, before thinking of sharing it with Bangladesh.

Bangladesh's problems have defied resolution, in some instances frustrated by the position taken by Indian state leaders, which is of no relevance for Bangladesh. Teesta and border killings are the two issues that dampen the relationship between the two neighbours whose relationship is at such levels of comfort, according to Mr Jaishankar, that there is no issue that the two countries cannot discuss and resolve through amicable dialogue. Regrettably, facts present a different reality.

Brig Gen Shahedul Anam Khan, ndc, psc (Retd), is a former Associate Editor of The Daily Star.

## MYANMAR COUP

# Asean, once again, don't look away

RAUDAH YUNUS and GIDEON LASCO

THE military coup in Myanmar that overturned its election results and put the country's leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, in house arrest is a shocking, if unsurprising, reminder that even as the Covid-19 pandemic rages, political strife continues around the world and the pandemic itself is used to enact and perpetuate authoritarianism. As the harrowing scenes unfold, we can only express outrage over this turn of events: No country deserves to be ruled by force, and no country deserves to be deprived of their elected leaders.

But while we express solidarity with

violence that involved Myanmar's armed forces, the Tatmadaw.

Now that the Tatmadaw has seized power—on top of the authority they never really forfeited—what is to become of the Rohingya in light of these disconcerting developments?

The Rohingya people living in Myanmar (and beyond) are already expressing heightened anxiety and fear, as a coup means the country will be back to square one after having made some progress toward democracy. Even during the so-called "quasi-democratic" period, there was no significant improvement in the Rohingya crisis. Now with the coup, the situation can easily deteriorate. In



Anti-coup demonstrators spray fire extinguishers over a barricade during a protest in Yangon, Myanmar, on March 9, 2021.

PHOTO: REUTERS/STRINGER

the people of Myanmar in their bid for more democracy and less tyranny, we are also reminded of the Rohingya people and their continuing predicament. In September 2019, we visited Kutupalong near the Bangladesh-Myanmar border—one of the world's largest refugee camps—and saw first-hand the suffering of men, women and children, many of whom were driven away by the mass

the worst scenario, violence can recur. In the best scenario, the old tensions will remain with no meaningful step forward, thus diminishing the hope for hundreds of thousands of the Rohingya diaspora worldwide to be able to return home.

The coup is also likely to affect the current trial in the International Court of Justice (ICJ) that Myanmar is facing as a result of the mass killings

and displacement of the Rohingya. Given that the "new government" is more intimately tied to the Rohingya conflicts and genocide, they will likely not appear before the ICJ to testify, or even show the slightest interest to engage with the judicial process. As a result, Myanmar will be further isolated and the Rohingya's hope for redress will be further dimmed.

On the other hand, this could be a turning point for the peoples of Myanmar: perhaps the pro-democracy protesters and the Rohingya community will now see that they actually have a common enemy, the Tatmadaw, whose brutality toward ethnic minorities is now being unleashed upon the rest of the country. Not only that, the two segments also share similar aspirations: greater transparency, power-sharing, and respect for people's voices.

There are certainly many lessons to learn from what is happening, but the most profound is that the people of Myanmar, including the Rohingya, must unite to save the country. To do this, they must look past ethnic and cultural differences and work toward building a peaceful and inclusive democracy.

On the other hand, Asean nations, especially our leaders, have a great responsibility to side with the peoples of Myanmar as well as their legitimately elected representatives. The current responses from Asean governments

not only fall short of expectations, but also reflect division and a lack of moral courage. While Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia expressed "concerns" over the situation, Thailand and Cambodia regarded it as an "internal matter," and the Philippines shamefully dissociated from the UNHRC resolution on the Myanmar crisis. Others have yet to take a stand.

This responsibility extends to the Rohingya people, whose statelessness and forced exodus should never have been condoned in the first place. Perhaps we can draw inspiration from the African Union, which did not allow misguided and often self-serving concepts like "sovereignty" and "non-interference" to get in the way of their decision to suspend Egypt from all its activities after the military coup in 2013. Principles, not politics, must govern Asean. Indeed, only a principled stand against the perpetrators of the Myanmar coup can do justice to Asean's vision of a community "living in peace, stability and prosperity."

After coming back from our Kutupalong trip in 2019, we pleaded for Asean not to look away. Today, in the wake of the unlawful coup in Myanmar, we plead again: Asean, don't look away.

Raudah Yunus is a researcher, writer, and social activist based in Kuala Lumpur. Gideon Lasco is a physician, anthropologist, and Inquirer columnist based in Manila. Courtesy: Asia News Network